

Introduction to Louis Spohr and *Nonet* in F major, Op. 31

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For composers to enjoy great popularity in their lifetime and then, after their death, to be gradually forgotten is not uncommon. Louis Spohr is a case in point; there was a time, according to Stanford, when he was considered to be an even greater composer than Beethoven. Moreover, his popularity was by no means confined to his native Germany. From 1820 onwards, for example, he made frequent appearances at concerts of the Philharmonic Society in London and between that year and 1897 almost three hundred performances of his works were given there." [John Lade] _ Although much of Spohr's prolific output remains unknown and unperformed, undeservedly so in my opinion, one work has remained popular and been performed throughout its entire existence - two hundred and one years to be precise. His *Nonet*, more accurately his *Grand Nonetto* in F major, Op.31, was composed in 1813 and is scored for flute, oboe, clarinet, horn, violin, viola, cello and double bass. It has remained in the repertoire for all this time, has been recorded many times, and was the forerunner and blueprint of almost every nonet since.

Although other works had been written for nine players before, Spohr's work was the first to actually use the title 'nonet' and many composers have written for the same combination of instruments over the past two hundred years, particularly for the Czech Nonet, founded in 1924. The basic instrumentation of the group was influenced by Spohr's *Nonet*, which was performed in their first concert on 17 January 1924, and more than 300 works have been composed for them over the past 90 years.

Louis Spohr (apparently, he preferred the French spelling of his name to the German Ludwig) was born in Brunswick (Braunschweig) on 5 April 1784 and died in Kassel on 22 October 1859, where he had lived and worked for the last 37 years of his life. Spohr's early years were spent as a violin virtuoso, composer and conductor, travelling extensively, and he relied on the patronage of the wealthy aristocracy for commissions and invitations, as did most of the composers of the day. Spohr spent three years in Vienna (1812-1815), when he became friendly with Beethoven, and his *Nonet* and *Octet* were both written at this time.

Spohr's autobiography (*Selbstbiographie*, published 1860-61) gives a wonderful account of the commission for both works, which was unusual to say the least, but also demonstrates a business man with a lateral approach to meeting potential clients and business partners.

“Word had hardly gotten around Vienna that I was to settle there when one morning a distinguished visitor presented himself: a Herr Johann von Tost, manufacturer and passionate music lover. [Tost is remembered today, for commissioning two sets of string quartets from Haydn and two string quintets from Mozart]. He began a hymn of praise about my talent as a composer, and expressed the wish that, for a suitable emolument, everything that I should write in Vienna be reckoned as his property for a period of three years. Then he added, ‘Your works may be performed as often as possible, but the score must be borrowed from me for each occasion and performed only in my presence.’ I was to think it over and myself determine the fee for each type of composition. With this he presented his card and took his leave. I attempted in vain to fathom the motive of this proposal, and I finally decided to question him directly. First, however, I made some inquiries about him, and determined that he was a rich man and a great lover of music who never missed a public concert. This was reassuring, and I decided to accept his proposal. As fee, I set 30 ducats for a quartet, 35 for a quintet and so forth. When I asked him just what he proposed to do with my works, he was reluctant to answer, but finally said, ‘I have two objectives. First, I want to be invited to the musicales where your pieces will be played, and therefore I must have them in my possession. Secondly, I hope that on my business trips the possession of such treasures will bring me the acquaintanceship of music lovers who, in turn, may be useful to me in my business.’ While all this

did not make much sense to me, I found it most pleasantly flattering, and I had no further reservations. Tost accepted the fees that I had set, and further agreed to pay upon delivery. The appropriate documents were drawn up and signed accordingly...I bethought myself of my obligation to Tost, and asked him what he would like. He thought for a moment and decided for a nonet, made up of four strings plus flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon and horn, to be written in such a way that each instrument would appear in its true character. I was much attracted by the difficulty of the assignment and went right to work. This was the origin of the famous Nonet...I finished the work in short order and delivered it to Tost. It was played at one of the first musicales of the new season and aroused such enthusiasm that it was repeated frequently in the course of that same season. Tost appeared each time with the score and parts under his arm, set them out on the music stands himself, and gathered them up again after the performance. He was as pleased by the applause as if he himself had been the composer."

The Nonet is in four well-contrasted movements and lasts around 30 minutes, allowing it to be easily programmed with similar chamber works, and is often the work around which programs are based. One writer describes the work as containing "...many beautiful melodic ideas presented with a Beethovenian sense of soulful thematic work. In it, the composer combined strings and winds in the most varied ways to achieve unusual effects..."

- **The first movement** (Allegro) is dominated by a short motif introduced by the violin and the melodic material is passed from player to player, with the double bass usually providing a support for the ensemble or occasionally doubling a low theme or phrase with the cello. The music generally bubbles along and is gently rhapsodic contrasted with short outbursts of virtuosity from the violin and cello.
- **The second movement** (Allegro), a scherzo with two trios "in which one experiences a sensation both of darkness and peaceful serenity." The movement has a Viennese charm, offering a solo role for the violin which was probably played the composer at the first performances in Vienna.
- **The Adagio** "is related to the first movement using its opening motif combined with song-like passages of exceptional beauty." Spohr produces simple and sonorous textures against which the players are able to weave their lyrical melodies and the beauty of the movement creates a moment of peace and serenity.
- **A fun and cheerful** Finale (Vivace) has a cheeky opening theme which dominates the movement. Even the cello and bass are included, albeit in their lowest register, and the music merrily bounces along providing a fitting and successful conclusion to a chamber work of great invention and worth.

It isn't difficult to understand why players and audiences have loved this piece for over 200 years. The double bass part is typical of much chamber music of the time, with its combination of bass-line support and occasional forays into the melodic material, but usually supported by the cellist. There is nothing here to tax the bassist but much to enjoy. Will Spohr's *Nonet* survive another 200 years? I can't see why not and am almost certain that it will. The music is lively, inventive, beautifully written and scored and is a wonderful introduction to the music of this underrated and great composer. If you like the *Nonet*, try some of the symphonies... David Heyes [7 September 2014]